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WMU News

Public forum addresses Kalamazoo River PCB cleanup

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KALAMAZOO--Western Michigan University will host a public forum for Kalamazoo-area residents, city officials, scientists and environmental nonprofit leaders, to discuss the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's recently announced plans to excavate and dispose of toxin-contaminated wastes from the Kalamazoo River.

"Kalamazoo River and PCBs: A Public Education Forum" will take place from 7 to 9 p.m. Thursday, April 12, in Room 209 of the Bernhard Center. The forum will provide members of the Kalamazoo community the opportunity to become educated on the background of the river's pollution and related issues, as well as discuss possible actions for a solution that meets citizen and community needs.

Panelists will include Dr. Duane Hampton, WMU associate professor of geosciences; Dr. Charles Ide, WMU director of the Environmental Institute and professor of biological sciences; A. Lee Kirk, city attorney, city of Kalamazoo; Bruce Merchant, director of public services, city of Kalamazoo; and Jeff Spoelstra, coordinator, Kalamazoo River Watershed Council.

Additional panelists include Sam Borries, EPA on-scene coordinator; Shari Kolak, EPA remedial project manager; and Paul Bucholtz, senior project manager, Michigan Department of Environmental Quality's Superfund Section.

Pollution of the Kalamazoo River can be traced back to the 1800s when the Industrial Revolution drew papermaking factories to the area's plentiful resources, including the water in the Kalamazoo River. Over time, the river's primary function became that of an industrial waste disposal site. In the 1960s, local scientists found the pesticide DDT and large amounts of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, in the river. By the late 1970s, fish-consumption advisories were released and a preliminary assessment of the river's PCB problem was ordered. In 1990, the federal government placed the Kalamazoo River on its National Priorities List for cleanup, making it what is commonly known as a Superfund Site.

"PCBs are highly toxic manmade chemicals, that once had wide industrial use," says Dr. Sarah Hill, assistant professor of anthropology and environmental studies at WMU. "Studies have shown an association between PCBs and numerous health problems, including reproductive disorders, endocrine system disruption and probably some cancers."

According to the EPA's Region 5 Cleanup report, the affected area stretches 80 miles across Michigan, from Saugatuck on the west to about 10 miles east of Battle Creek. The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality estimates that this area contains more than 110,000 pounds of PCBs and 8 million cubic yards of contaminated river and floodplain sediments. PCB-contaminated waste also was placed in four disposal areas near the river.

Cleanup of one 1.5-mile stretch of the river between Plainwell and Otsego, Mich., is scheduled to begin sometime this month, but issues surrounding how the toxic chemicals will be extracted and where they will be disposed of have raised significant concerns among residents and city officials. Hill says the upcoming forum seeks to address these longstanding concerns, and provide a historical overview and current situational analysis of the Kalamazoo River and the toxic pollutants that have been left to area residents by industries that have operated along its banks.

"Kalamazoo River and PCBs: A Public Education Forum" is sponsored by WMU's Environmental Institute and Students for Sustainable Earth, a registered student organization at WMU. It is being presented in conjunction with the University's Earth Week activities.

For more information, contact Sarah Hill at sarah.hill@wmich.edu.

Related article
Earth Week celebration runs through Thursday

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